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Some Aspects of the Overland Oriental Trade at the Christian Era. — By WILFRED H. SCHOFF, Secretary of the Commercial Museum, Philadelphia, Pa.

The conquests of Alexander resulted in a great development of commerce between India and the Mediterranean, which was made possible through the establishment of a regular overland trade route under single control from end to end. This was the route which led from Antioch in Syria to the ford of the Euphrates, thence down that river and across to Seleucia on the Tigris, up the Zagros valley, over the plateau to the Caspian Gates and north of the Persian desert to Nisaea and Antiochia Margiana; thence through Bactria to the Pamirs, or through Arachosia to Kabul and the Panjāb. Under the earlier Seleucidae Greek cities grew up at frequent intervals along this great highway of commerce, and Greek traders were active.

The disintegration of the Greek power in Asia was succeeded by the establishment of the Parthian dynasty, and the disintegration of the Greek power in Mediterranean lands was succeeded by the establishment of the Roman Empire. For three centuries the diplomacy of these two powers was focussed on their trade relations. The Parthians controlled the great overland trade route, and levied onerous taxes on the rich commerce that passed over it to the new market of the West; the Romans sought to create new trade routes, or failing that, to force better terms from Parthia.

The trade was largely in gems, spices and fine textiles from India, and in silk from China, paid for in coin or its equivalent, for Rome had little else to offer. It was therefore a trade that was peculiarly subject to intermediate taxation by any power established astride the trade-routes, and peculiarly susceptible of diversion from one route to another.

As the power and wealth of Rome increased, the enterprise

of her subjects was directed eastward, and before 50 A. D. the periodicity of the Indian monsoons was observed and Roman shipping was regularly dispatched from Egyptian ports to India, steering straight across the ocean and no longer hugging the shore. This sea trade was very actively developed between 50 and 100 A. D. and seriously crippled the overland caravan business; but before this came about, there was another important diversion of trade from the Parthian highway. In the Mediterranean lands it was observed through the growing prosperity of Petra at the expense of Antioch. By tracing the new route we may discover a striking combination of political and commercial elements that threatened the very existence of the Parthian power.

The route led from Petra, either overland across Arabia, or more notably by sea around Arabia, to the head of the Persian Gulf; thence up the mountains of Elam and overland south of the Persian desert to Lake Helmand, Arachosia and Kabul. This brought into combination the Nabataean Kingdom, the Arab states of Mesene and Characene which were closely related to it, the ancient Kingdom of Persis, the Scythian Sacae, and finally the Yue-chi or Kushans, ruling on either side of the Hindu Kush, in territory taken by them from the Greek kings of Bactria.

Of these elements three, the Arab Persian Gulf states, the Sacae at Lake Helmand and the Persians between, were at least nominally subject to the Parthian dynasty, but the bond was very loose. We read in the *Shah Nama* the contempt of Persia for the Parthians; "the throne did not belong to any one" and "men said that they had no longer a kingdom on the earth." And the Sacae, though admitting the Parthian overlordship, had previously admitted that of the Yue-chi, by whom they had been driven over the Pamirs, and who had followed them and were settled in adjoining territory; so that by inheritance they were no subjects of Parthia. The maintenance of overland trade by this route, in competition with the older Parthian route, depended on the existence of a strong power controlling the passes into India and Turkestan. Precisely this power existed under the Yue-chi dynasties.

There has been much discussion of the dates of these dynasties and the extent of the territories over which they ruled.

The tribes came out of Chinese territory and overran Bactrian territory before 100 B. C. Overland trade between China and the Greeks in Bactria had been opened soon after 200 B. C., the terrors of the great deserts having been overcome by the use of the Bactrian camel. By their control of the mountain passes the Yue-chi tribes were intermediaries in this trade, from the profits of which the growth of their influence was no doubt derived. After an uncertain period of settlement north of the Hindu Kush they penetrated India through the upper Indus and the Panjāb, and established there an empire which perhaps overshadowed and outlasted their Bactrian dominion. Their various tribes, although apparently allied or confederated, were under chieftains of different families, so that their dynasties were not necessarily continuous.

Recent debate has been focussed on the relative priority of the two leading Kushan dynasties, the one including Kozoulo and Wima Kadphises (the former at first ruling jointly with the Greek Hermaeus) and the other, Kanishka, Vasishka, Kanishka II., Huvishka and Vasudeva. The Kadphises dynasty, it is generally admitted, attached to themselves the remnants of the Greek kingdom of Kabul and overthrew the Indo-Parthian kingdom of Gondophares, about 50 A. D., after which they greatly enlarged the Kushan dominions in Arachosia and India. The beginning of the Kanishka dynasty is dated 58 B. C., the so called Vikrama era, by Prof. Sylvain Lévi, Prof. O. Franke, Dr. Fleet, Mr. Kennedy and others; 78 A. D., the Saka or Salivahana era, by Fergusson, Prof. Percy Gardner, Prof. E. J. Rapson, Dr. F. W. Thomas, Cunningham, and by Mr. Vincent A. Smith, in the third edition of his *Early History of India*, although in previous editions he had preferred a 2nd century dating; and by the Messrs. Bhandarkar as late as 278 A. D. The question of Kanishka's date is important because of its bearing on the history of both politics and religion; for in addition to his military achievements he convened a great Buddhist council out of which developed a missionary activity that was possibly felt as far away as China and Roman Syria. While the recent discussion of this question at sessions of the Royal Asiatic Society¹ in London has, perhaps, resulted in no final conversion to any of these dates

¹ JRAS, various numbers, 1912-13-14; see also the introductory treatises in the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, new ed., vols. I and II.

by its partisans, it has served especially to direct attention to the important part played by the Kushan dynasties in the international silk trade; and further examination of the general state of international diplomacy and commerce of that period indicates, if not an earlier dating of a single dynasty like that of Kanishka, at least a dating of the domination of international trade-routes by the Yue-chi earlier than the overthrow of the Gondophares dynasty, about the middle of the first century.

The increase in the importation of silk at Rome was noted before the end of the Republic, and even at a time when conditions tended to restrict traffic through the trade-route terminus at Antioch. Lucan¹ gives a vivid description of the charms of Cleopatra seen through the "Sidonian fabric"; during the reign of Augustus silk fabrics were much affected by men, although the fashion was considered effeminate; and early in the reign of Tiberius the Roman Senate enacted a law² "that men should not defile themselves by wearing garments of silk". If we credit the various statements of Pliny³ this law was ineffective, and the demand for silk continued to grow; the fabric was worth its weight in gold, and the trade was a serious drain on the resources of the Empire. Pliny, indeed, counts it among the "most valuable productions"; "the most costly things that are gathered from trees are nard and Seric tissues".

The rise of the Nabataean trade coincided with the decline of the Ptolemies in Egypt and the overthrow of the Sabaeans, the commercial intermediaries of the Ptolemies, in South Arabia, by their neighbors and rivals the Homerites, who levied tribute on all traders from Egypt. This upheaval in South Arabia led also to the expulsion of another tribe, the Abaseni, into Africa, where they established the Abyssinian kingdom.⁴

This happened about, or a little before, the Christian era.⁵ By 80 A. D. those "people called Axumites" were established, and maintained friendly relations with Rome; so we are told by the author of the *Periplus*;⁶ later they were active allies

¹ Pharsalia X, 141.

² Tacitus, Annals. II, 33.

³ Hist. Nat. VI, 20; XI, 26; XXI, 8; XXXVII, 67.

⁴ Glaser, *Skizze der Geschichte und Geographie Arabiens*, ch. XIV.

⁵ Glaser, *Die Abessinier in Arabien und Afrika*.

⁶ *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, §§ 4, 5; ed. Schoff, pp. 61-6, 140-2.

of the Romans and cooperated with them in destroying the power of the Homerites and thus clearing the sea-route to the East.

The Nabataean allies at the head of the Persian Gulf were the states of Characene and Mesene. Racially they were closely related. From their port of Obollah or Apologus (the Ubulu of the Assyrian inscriptions) the author of the *Periplus* noted in 80 A. D. an active sea-trade to India,¹ exporting gold and various products and bringing back timber and less bulky merchandise. Now the Chinese annals give us an important reference to this state. In a section written about 90 A. D. and embracing facts coming within the period 206 B. C. to 25 A. D. we find this comment:²

"The country of T'iao-chih is densely populated; it used to be governed by petty rulers, but An-hsi (Parthia) reducing them to vassalage, made it into a dependency".

At the time this was inserted in the annals it must have been "news". It can probably be referred to the latter half of the first century A. D. The author of the *Periplus* knew no Parthia; indeed, he speaks of "Persis" as an independent power, holding half of Southern Arabia.³ And a later passage in the Chinese annals refers again to T'iao-chih as having become "subject to Parthia as a vassal state under a military governor having control of all the small cities".⁴

The century following the Roman occupation of Syria was one of unrest among the Arab tribes of the northern desert, and the old highway from Antioch to Seleucia was infested with robbers. Indeed, it was not until the rise of Palmyra that the caravan trade was effectively policed and again became prosperous. And we have two records that indicate some effort of the Parthians to connect with the Southern, or Nabataean route; one Chinese, the other Greek.

In a year fixed as 97 A. D. "the general Pan-Chao sent Kan Ying as an ambassador to Ta-ts'in, who arrived in T'iao-chih, on the coast of the great sea. When about to take his passage across the sea, the sailors of the western frontier of Parthia told Kan-Ying: 'the sea is vast and great; with favorable winds it is possible to cross within three months:

¹ *Periplus* 149-151.

² Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*, 145.

³ *Periplus*, §§ 27, 87: *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 161.

⁴ Hirth, *op. cit.*, 38.

but if you meet slow winds, it may take you two years. It is for this reason that those who go to sea take on board a supply of three years' provisions. There is something in the sea which is apt to make a man homesick, and several have thus lost their lives'. When Kan-Ying heard this, he stopped."¹

Now this port where the timid Kan-Ying ended his mission and avoided *mal de mer*, is named Yü-lo, which Prof. Hirth identifies with Hira below Seleucia, whence ships reached the Persian Gulf by the Euphrates, or the Pallacopas Canal.² It was "at the extreme west frontier of Parthia"; below it was T'iao-chih of the Arabs, which later came into vassalage; and from this place "coming from the land-road of Parthia you make a round at sea, and taking a northern turn, come out from the western part of the sea, whence you proceed to Ta-ts'in",—by circumnavigating Arabia.³ That is, at the end of the first century A. D. the Parthians were cutting into the Arab sea-route and about the same time they subjugated the Arabs themselves.

The Greek source for our view of the policy of Parthia as regards this southern route, is in the *Mansiones Parthicae* or *Parthian Stations* of Isidore of Charax, dating close to the Christian era.⁴ Here we are taken by the older route from Antioch to Seleucia, with mention of the "island in the Euphrates, where was the treasure of Phraates, who cut the throats of his concubines, when Tiridates the exile invaded the land";⁵ and of the Greek city Artemita—"but now it is called Chalasar",⁶ (showing the growth of Arab influence). Thence Isidore proceeds through Parthia proper to Nisaea and Antiochia Margiana. But here, instead of bearing eastward, his route bends southward through "Alexandria of the Arii"⁷ to "Sacastana of the Scythian Sacae", being the Lake Helmand region,⁸ and finally "the city of Alexandropolis, the metropolis of Arachosia; it is Greek, and by it flows the river Arachotus".⁹ And here the itinerary ends with the statement "As far as this place the land is under the rule of the Parthians".

That is, at the Christian era no Parthian custom-houses

¹ Hirth, *op. cit.* 39.

² *Ibid.* 39.

³ *Ibid.* 43.

⁴ Müller, *Geographi Graeci Minores*, I, 244-256; also ed. Schoff, Philadelphia, 1914.

⁵ Isidore, § 1.

⁶ *Ibid.* § 2.

⁷ *Ibid.* § 15.

⁸ *Ibid.* § 18.

⁹ *Ibid.* § 19.

collected their tolls east of Mervrud, Herat and Kandahar. Between those points and the Pamirs it seems necessary to infer the existence of a foreign and independent power, which can hardly have been other than that of the Yue-chi.¹

But observe that Isidore shows us Parthian control over one section of the southern route, that between Kandahar and Lake Helmand,³ and a northern connection from that point to the old overland route;⁴ while we have ample evidence that from the Saka territory trade went also through Carmana to Charax Spasini and Obollah, where it paid tolls to another power. This we may explain from the peculiar position of the Sacae, with their dual subjection, Kushan by inheritance and Parthian by adoption. And just at this time they played a large part in the Parthian empire; for when Phraates IV. whom Isidore mentions, was first driven from his capital by Tiridates in 33 B. C. he fled to the Scythians, who lent him troops and reestablished him on his throne. Just then the Parthians were in no position to be over-insistent on their sovereign rights; for the Romans supported Tiridates (who struck coins with the title *Philoromaïos* in addition to the usual *Philhellēnos* of the Parthians) and kept him in their pay as an ever-useful pretender to the throne of their enemies.⁵

One of the earliest Chinese references to Parthia states that "when the emperor Wu-ti (B. C. 140-86) first sent an

¹ That such a power existed north of the Hindu Kush is indisputed. Between that range and the Indus the Greek city-state of Kabul may well have been the only place that had not succumbed to it. The routes eastward from Herat to the Bamian-Balkh pass, and from Kandahar to Kabul, had formerly been feeders to the Parthian trade-route; now they were under other hands. Isidore lists Arachosia and Sacastana under the Parthian dominions, but this was evidently no more than their western border. Later (about 35 A. D.) they moved eastward under Gondophares, and in the general break-up after his death (about 50 A. D.) the author of the *Periplus* (80 A. D.) found quarrelling Parthians at the mouths of the Indus, while above them were the Arattii, (a Panjāb tribe) the Arachosii, the Gandaraei (Gandhāra, with its capital Takshasilā, Taxila) and the people of Poclais (western Gandhāra, below Kabul, with its capital Pushkalāvati, Pukkalaoti, the Peucelaotis of Arrian) and "above these the very warlike nation of the Bactrians",² certainly the Yue-chi, probably then dominant over the small states above mentioned.

² *Periplus*, § 47; *op. cit.*, pp. 183-7.

³ Isidore, § 18.

⁴ *Ibid.* §§ 16, 17, 18.

⁵ Wroth, *Catalogue of the Coins of Parthia in the British Museum*, XXXVIII, plates 16-23.

embassy to Parthia the king ordered a general to meet him on the eastern frontier with 20,000 cavalry. As they sent an embassy to follow the Chinese embassy they came to see the country of China. In the east of Parthia are the Ta-Yuehchi"¹ (Kushans)—we may infer, not yet independent. And two centuries later, when the campaigns of Pan-chao brought the Chinese arms westward, we are told that he "established contact with Parthia"—that is, that by the end of the first century A. D. the Kushan power no longer blocked the Chinese trade-routes, but was confined to the Indus and its affluents.

The development of trade between the Kushan and the Nabataean dominions was the result of disorganization and weakness in the Roman and Parthian empires. With their recovery we shall see how quickly this interloping combination was broken up. Rome disliked Parthia, but one set off tariff-collectors was better than two; and the author of the *Periplus* tells us the Nabataeans took their 25 % of all merchandise and maintained a garrison to collect it.² So the policy of Rome was to develop some workable arrangement with Parthia for the overland trade, to build up her own sea-trade, and to destroy other competitors. A like policy ruled in Parthia and China.

While Rome was torn by the civil wars following the murder of Julius Caesar, and Parthia by those following the murder of Orodes by his son Phraates whom Isidore mentions, Kabul, Obollah and Petra could trade together unmolested; and this state of things endured until the close of the war of the Armenian succession, 58 to 62 A. D., after which there was lasting peace between Rome and Parthia.³ Even at the Christian era Isidore shows us the Parthians tapping it at Lake Hira. In 80 A. D. the author of the *Periplus* knew of the Kushans as "the very warlike nation of the Bactrians", who dwelt "above the Arachosians"⁴—but their warlikeness received a severe check in 90 A. D. when a Kushan king sent a great army, said to have included 70,000 cavalry, over the Pamirs to do battle with the Chinese general

¹ Hirth, *op. cit.*, pp. 36, 140.

² *Periplus*, § 19: *op. cit.*, p. 104.

³ Rawlinson, *Sixth Monarchy*, ch. XVI.

⁴ *Periplus*, § 47; *op. cit.*, p. 184.

Pan Chao.¹ The Kushan force was annihilated; Pan Chao "established contact with Parthia", and the 2d century A. D. shows us the Kushans overrunning India as far as the Ganges, but no longer measuring strength with China or Parthia. And in 104 A. D. the emperor Trajan sent a Roman army to the conquest of Petra and the destruction of the Nabataean Kingdom.² Parthia alone remained to claim its share of the overland trade and to compete with the Roman sea-trade; as the Chinese annals have it, "they (the Romans) traffic by sea with Parthia and India, the profit of which trade is tenfold. They are honest in their transactions, and there are no double prices . . . Their kings always desired to send embassies to China, but the Parthians wished to carry on trade with them in Chinese silks, and it is for this reason that they were cut off from communication. This lasted until the ninth year of the Yen-hsi period during the emperor Huan-ti's reign (A. D. 166) when the King of Ta-ts'in, Antun (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus) sent an embassy who from the frontier of Jih-nan (Annam) offered ivory, rhinoceros horns and tortoise shell"; (products of the Abyssinian coast of Africa)—"from that time dates the direct intercourse with this country".³

These various facts indicate that during the century between 50 B. C. and 50 A. D. we can account for the existence of a strong power, independent of Rome or Parthia, astride the overland trade routes, and that after about 50 A. D. we must assume its decadence and soon after 100 A. D. its passing from Central Asiatic affairs and its expansion in a purely Indian field. The Chinese annals show us the Yue-chi west of the Pamirs by 100 B. C. Does the later history of Turkish invaders lead us to suppose that this tribe remained peaceful shepherds for more than a century when let loose on the remains of Greek prosperity in Bactria? Did they not rather, like the Ottoman Turks, pursue their conquests with full vigor, fortifying themselves by assuming a religious leadership that would command the allegiance of their victims?

The history of the first century B. C. requires a Yue-chi

¹ V. A. Smith, *Early History of India*, 3^d ed. pp. 253-4; Douglas, *China* (Story of the Nations series), p. 18; Lévi, *Notes sur les Indo-Scythes*, p. 50.

² Dio Cassius, 68, 14.

³ Hirth, *op. cit.*, p. 42; this was probably a trading venture, and not an official mission.

power, if not everywhere supreme, at least the dominant force, between the Oxus and the Indus, taking full advantage of the temporary weakness of Rome and Parthia to strengthen its control of the silk-trade; the century following the Christian era shows that power spreading over Northern India and finally reaching the Erythraean Sea; but for an "Indo-Scythian" in the second century A. D. shutting off Chinese from Parthians there is no ready explanation. After the defeat at Kashgar and the fall of Petra, the bases for such a power are not apparent. And whatever the ultimate decision as to the date of Kanishka (which the fortunate discovery of some inscription may at any time establish beyond doubt) it is clear at least that his race before and during the first century exerted a more complete control of the overland trade-routes than they could have done at any date after 100 A. D.¹

On the sea-route the Indo-Scythians asserted themselves after their overland control declined. We find many evidences of their activity in the Indian Ocean. Pausanias gives us one, where he mentions the "island of Seria", usually confused with the Seres of China, but which we may identify with Masira on the southern coast of Arabia. He follows earlier writers in saying "both the Seres and the inhabitants of the neighboring islands of Abasa and Sacaea (the modern Kuria Muria) are of the Ethiopian race". But he qualifies by adding "some say, however, that they are not Ethiopians but a mixture of Scythians and Indians".² The author of the *Periplus* saw there only "three villages of natives, a rascally lot, wearing girdles of palm leaves";³ but the Indus delta he knew as "the coast district of Scythia, which lies above toward the north".⁴

And so we are led to a later Chinese account, when the

¹ The subsequent history of the Kushan tribes north of the Hindu Kush is still obscure. Apparently they were much reduced by the Sassanians in Persia and a new race of Asiatic invaders, the Ephthalite Huns. In 481 A. D. the Kushans defeated the Sassanian king Perozes, who attacked them where they then lived, on the southern shore of the Caspian; but about 600 A. D. they were overwhelmed by Armenian troops subject to the greatest of the Sassanians, Chosroes II. At that time both Kushans and Ephthalites were apparently vassals of the Turks. (Cf. Rawlinson, *Seventh Monarchy*, XVI; XXIV.)

² Pausanias, *Descr. Graec.* IV, 26; see *Periplus*, ed. Schoff, pp. 144-6.

³ *Periplus*, § 33; *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁴ *Periplus*, § 38; *op. cit.*, p. 166.

missionary activities of the Kushan monarchs had outlived their military glory:¹ "as regards Ta-ts'in and T'ien-chu (Syria and India) far out on the western ocean, we have to say that, although the envoys of the two Han dynasties have experienced the special difficulties of this road, yet traffic in merchandise has been effected, and goods have been sent out to the foreign tribes, the force of winds driving them far away across the waves of the sea . . . All the precious things of land and water come from there . . . and also the doctrine of the abstraction of mind in devotion to the Lord of the world, all this having caused navigation and trade to be extended to those parts'.

¹ Hirth, *op. cit.*, p. 46. General attention will also have been given to the results of Dr. Marshall's explorations in the Gandhāra region. His paper on the Date of Kanishka (*JRAS*, Oct. 1914) appeared subsequently to the preparation of the foregoing, and points perhaps in the same direction, of Kushan influence waning in Central Asia as it advanced in Northwestern India. It is, of course, mainly by archaeological investigation that any question like this can be finally solved.

(W. H. S., June, 1915.)